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Is it in the best interest of Libby to have a Clinical Research Center based here? I would like to provide some examination of this question, but first one must ask another question. Is it in the best interest of W. R. Grace? This corporation may have to pay for the cleanup and currently dictate, through the Grace Medical Plan, what should be considered asbestos related disease and what should not.

Contrary to what many believe, W. R. Grace is still very much in the picture and it seems they are very much interested in controlling what takes place here in regard to past and future toxic exposure. As far as future exposure is concerned, when the federal judge in Missoula ruled in favor of EPA, that the cost of cleanup to that date should be shouldered by W. R. Grace, this responsible corporation was provided a huge stake in how much our Superfund cleanup will cost. I would add, that since the judge's ruling, it seems that cost has become a primary concern, weighing over what is adequately protective for our people. I'm not saying that the judge made a bad decision, but his ruling sets us up to do battle with those who would consider expenditure over cost in human health and life.

So what does the cleanup have to do with a research facility being established?

It is my opinion, based on much personal research and consultation with experts in the study of mineral fiber, that as hard as we may try, it will be nearly impossible to get a cleanup that will produce less than one cancer in 10,000 people. This number, one cancer in 10,000, is what the EPA usually considers to be the upper limit of "acceptable risk." It may be the case that we cannot even reduce the risk to what is allowed in the occupational setting, three cancers in 1000, as hard as we may try. While I am pleased each time I see a truckload of toxic material leaving town, I am greatly concerned that truckloads of this deadly material are deliberately being left behind because EPA has not yet been allowed to adopt policy that recognizes and utilizes the best available science. Current regulatory policy is outdated, as it does not consider toxicity difference among fiber types and is simply wrong. I don't fault the people from EPA who have been sent here to deal with this mess, they simply do what they are told to do by their bosses' bosses.

There has been a recent acknowledgment by some, that our Amphibole type asbestos fiber does not stay airborne for a very long time. EPA, to date, cannot tell us with any certainty just how long it does stay airborne and have, after much request, failed to produce this data. There is some evidence though, that strongly suggests, that it does not stay airborne for hours or days as does the commercial type asbestos. This explains why, with so much of this Tremolite series asbestos all around us, EPA has rarely detected fiber in the outside air in our town. They don't find it in our air because it does not stay suspended.

This considered, one should question the EPA's assessment that the disease as seen in our town today was due to high level, ongoing exposure while the mine was operating. While historical pollution episodes resulting in total exposure to our people did with little doubt occur, past exposure may have been grossly overestimated. It may be the case that the effects of toxic exposure as seen are due to much less exposure than we have previously thought.

Exposures that occur today and in the future will largely be a result of people directly disturbing contaminated material, the tracking of contaminated soils into their homes and the leakage of vermiculite insulation from walls and attics into the living spaces where disturbances will be ongoing. Our fiber type becomes readily airborne when disturbed and it may take little exposure to cause disease.

We must have as thorough a cleanup as possible, far better than is currently being provided by EPA. It will be through research and policy change that we will get this right for ourselves and America. The clinical research, that can only come from an exposed population such as ours, is key. In addition to the knowledge that will help us stop further exposure, research might help healthcare providers to better assist the exposed in having a better quality of life, longer life, and hopefully cures.

There are a couple of things we need to acknowledge and we are quite certain about. It is not a requirement that a person have lung abnormalities seen on x-ray or to express symptoms for a person to be at risk of developing the incurable cancer, mesothelioma. All that is required is exposure, enough time for the disease to manifest and it seems, susceptible genetics. We've all heard that mesothelioma is a rare form of cancer, well, it's not rare in an exposed population like ours. With the exception of corporate interest, it is in the best interest for all to support and participate in the research to the extent that we feel comfortable.

Clinton Maynard



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